

Social Factors that Encourage Post-High School Education:

What works across racial and socioeconomic divides

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the social factors that encourage education post-high school, I conducted interviews among a strategic sample of University of Kansas students, selected to create diversity in race and economic status of the student body in their graduating high school, as determined by Department of Education data. Previous research explored factors including peer groups, availability of advanced placement courses and faculty attitudes about the perceived future success of students. None of this research took into account the ways these factors interact and for which groups these factors make the biggest difference. The interviews in this research explore influential factors including teachers, curricula, and peers. The information gathered from these interviews was then analyzed for patterns, including paying attention to factors that crossed racial and socioeconomic divides. I find that one important influence is that of teachers who also served students in an advising capacity in extracurricular activities. I also find that significant factors were more likely to cross racial than socioeconomic divides. Finally, it seems that students in lower socioeconomic categories express more positive attitudes about school and gratefulness for their chance at higher

education than those from more privileged socioeconomic categories.

INTRODUCTION

Students of racial minority groups and lower socioeconomic status are disproportionately unlikely to attend college in comparison to their Caucasian peers or those of higher socioeconomic status. Concern about this has led policymakers and educators to look to find ways to combat this. While there are initiatives across the country to attract minority students to colleges and universities and studies examining their effectiveness in motivating students to attend college, I chose to take a different approach. Rather than studying the effects of specific formal programs and practices, I chose to focus on the question from the perspective of those who have made it to college. Better understanding their experience and their reflections on these experiences can provide information on strategies to encourage underrepresented populations to pursue college education. I sought their reflections on the factors they found influential in getting them to college and helping them persist.

Historically, counselors encouraged students of lower socioeconomic status to pursue employment after college, but evolved into the rhetoric of “college for everyone”

(Schneider 2003). Race and class differences still shape students' educational experiences and attainment. Students of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to delay college and less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree. Those who do attend college are less likely to experience the increased wealth accumulation and opportunities that more students from privileged backgrounds enjoy as a result of educational attainment (Goldrick-Rab and Han 2011; Walpole 2003). Although educational aspirations beyond high school are rising nationally, (Roderick et al. 2009) there are still gaps in desired educational attainment across race and income boundaries with fewer racial minorities and students of lower socioeconomic status looking to pursue the same level of educational attainment as students of more privileged backgrounds. However, none of the studies used examining racial minorities incorporate those of higher socioeconomic status when studying their aspirations.

Structural disparities among high schools can also impact the level of difficulty students encounter when applying to college. For example, researchers examining the impact of the culture in urban high schools find that they tend to lack structural and organizational arrangements that facilitate better access to grants, scholarships and other assistance programs in the college application process (Holland and Farmer-Hinton 2009). The research examined for this study does not examine the elements that counteract the structural shortcomings in disadvantaged high schools.

While certain skill sets are valuable to future college education, increasing access to advanced placement and college

preparatory courses is not enough. Increasing opportunities for students to enroll in advanced placement courses tends to allow the same students to take multiple courses rather than encouraging a broader diversity of students to take at least one (Hallett and Venegas 2011). High schools deemed "at-risk" because they have lower graduation rates and test scores are more likely to leave students ill-prepared for college or employment regardless of course offerings (Williams 2012). These studies neglect to find the impact from the perspective of affected students- the differences they felt these initiatives did or did not make and the factors they found most important.

Another large body of research focuses specifically on the role of peers and their effect on students' aspirations. These studies find that more encouragement from parents and friends during adolescence is positively associated with increasing high school grade point average as well as educational aspirations (Witkow and Fuligni 2011, Holland 2011). The motivation levels of students and "passion, dedication, and commitment of staff" also play a vital role in pursuing a college education (Contreras 2011, Barile et al. 2012). I can find no research, however, examining whether these factors have equal impact across racial or socioeconomic status divides.

A great deal of research looks at the ways high school environments affect attitudes about college. Much of this focuses on the degree to which necessary skills are learned in the classroom including content knowledge and basic skills, core academic skills, non-cognitive or behavioral skills and "college knowledge"- that is, knowing how to effectively search and apply for college (Roderick et al. 2009). A 2012 report

found that when these “college knowledge” programs are implemented effectively, students attend college in greater numbers, are more likely to remain in college after the first year, more likely to earn a degree, become employed and earn higher wages (Johnson 2012). The idea of a college culture is becoming more prominent in high schools across the country, but we still do not know the impact of teacher support, individualized attention, and the broader support system in the school in helping students move forward. A broadly defined college culture results in greater numbers attending college, but researchers do not know which components are the most influential and how that might vary by students’ race and class.

While research literature examines the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students in educational aspirations, college preparatory course enrollment and structural programs in college preparation, I could find none that explored the perspective and motivation of disadvantaged students who pursued education beyond high school. The research addresses the positive relationship between peer support and encouragement and teacher commitment, but I want to further examine the relationship between students in historically low-achieving areas wanting to separate themselves from their peers through higher education. I focus specifically on the role of informal factors in increasing students’ confidence from their perspective, inspiring them to pursue further education and creating an interest in them to learn more.

METHODS

Qualitative interviews were used to collect data about participants’ high school experience and college preparation. The advantages of this

approach included greater possibility for discovering influential factors than numerical data can provide. It went in depth through anecdotal evidence, a feature quantitative research could not provide. Asking open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate and take the interview in a direction the researcher may not have anticipated and would have therefore been left out of survey questions. By allowing the interviews to evolve naturally and using a less structured format, the participant-driven method could be analyzed through the ways in which participants gave importance to issues and where they elaborated most.

I conducted these interviews with a sample of 12 University of Kansas students (see Table 1). The participants were selected using snowball sampling techniques in which initial participants were referred through an advisor working with programs for first-generation college students and students of color. This selection method was chosen because the students referred were involved with programs to promote academic success, thus these students had a greater likelihood of persisting and succeeding in college. These participants then referred future participants.

The interviewees were from different years in their college careers, with an equal number of male and female participants. Of the participants, four were selected from each of three racial categories (Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American) strategically selecting students in each category that graduated from both economically advantaged and economically disadvantaged high schools.

Race was self-identified by the interviewee. The socioeconomic status of the participant’s high school was determined using State Department of

Education data on free and reduced lunch rates. If the high school had more than 50% of students on free or reduced lunch, the school was classified as economically disadvantaged. If the school had less than 50% on free or reduced lunch, it was classified as economically advantaged.

Using what I knew from the information found in the research literature as well as topics I had not seen explored, I developed an interview guide to structure the interview and address key points (see Appendix A). In addition to general questions pertaining to their high school experience, interviewees were asked about the aspirations and support of their peers, as well as how closely connected they felt to their peers and pursuing education possibly at the expense of leaving peers behind. Interviewees were also asked to relate how close they remain to high school peers who chose separate paths. The level of detail in the college planning experience with advice and resources, the investment and commitment of the teacher or counselor, and what specific factors encouraged them to apply for college was important in analyzing the greater picture. As themes emerged early in interviews, the following interviews varied slightly in response in order to explore these themes in more detail.

Each of the interviews was audio recorded. The interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes with the average lasting approximately thirty minutes. After each interview, I wrote a memo taking note of things that could not be captured on audio- participants' comfort level, their willingness to open up and other non-verbal gestures.

I transcribed and began to code the transcriptions early in the interview process. Initially I began to code for mentions of key words including

influence/influential, relationship, and mentor. On the basis of those early interviews, I also began coding for references to meaningful, lessons and help/prepare. Then I looked for factors that recurred across interviews as well as when new ones emerged. The emerging themes that were not addressed in the literature added complexity to the research in determining why these factors had strong influence. Themes that were found when unsolicited with prompts were given special attention because they were of such importance to the participants they were mentioned without question.

In comparing across interviews, a few themes emerged consistently: teachers serving as advisors (often through extra-curricular activities), students surrounding themselves with like-minded peers and disassociating from those not sharing the same goals, and the degree to which the student was grateful for the access to a college education.

RESULTS

Finding a Mentor is Critical

The most prominent theme was something I never found discussed thoroughly in the research literature- the importance of informal advising. Teachers serving students in extra-curricular advising roles in addition to classroom teaching had the opportunity to develop relationships that eventually helped with the college planning process. However, these relationships looked different for students depending on their socioeconomic background. Take the experiences of two students who graduated from economically advantaged high schools.

Alicia, a white senior, talks about having a mentor in college preparation this way:

There were teachers [who helped prepare for college], but they weren't my own teachers. They were like friends of friends that I grew up with that just happened to be teachers. They were good mentors. They helped me establish a role to lean towards.

Penny, a white freshman, describes teachers' and mentors' role in helping with college preparation this way:

I don't know if [the relationships were] more helpful, as though they were more supportive. I mean, they weren't saying 'you should do this.' It was more like you can do whatever you set your mind to.

One of the stories that best encompasses the advising role described by many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds was told by Clinton, an African-American student from an economically disadvantaged high school. Here he tells the story of his forensics teacher:

I spent a lot of time with my forensics teacher, so I guess I would say I was pretty close to her. Just because you gotta spend hours outside of school working on your craft in forensics, you start to share stories and get close with them that way... Well, you just, I don't know [laughs], you just start sharing stories about life pretty much. I mean, she kinda connected with me because she grew up the same way I grew up and those things translated to other stories and just connecting that way, and we had a lot of commonalities in that we were into forensics, we both did debate and involved in high school. It just

made our relationship grow stronger... I would say I connected with [her] the most. I remember I didn't get accepted to KU because it was like some, like, conflict with my, like, transcript and I knew it was wrong, because how could I not get accepted to KU? And then like she was the one calling admissions for me and actually, like, resolved the issue for me and ultimately, got me into KU.

Like Clinton's story of the relationship that developed with his teacher because of the time they spent together outside of the classroom, many students echoed similar relationships that began this way and resulted in advising for college. Like Gabby, a Hispanic junior from an economically disadvantaged high school:

So like my English teacher who was also my forensics coach, was also my Scholar's Bowl coach, so we spent a lot of time together inside of the classroom, outside of the classroom... It's something that we talked about and that, you know, even if it was just a casual conversation about what I wanted to do with my life he was very helpful with advice and with little helpful hints, stuff like that.

We see a similar experience from Ben, a Hispanic student from an economically disadvantaged high school:

My forensics and debate teachers I was pretty close to, because we used to go to tournaments that was like out of school like sessions or whatever for debate and forensics... They just offered me knowledge and asked me. They were kind of like mentors, just asking me how school was going, asking me how

my days went, what they could do help me and further my education. From the relationships that formed from commonalities shared over extra-curricular activities, they also found common interests in the classroom that helped students flourish and would eventually lead to a course of study in college. This is the case with Max, a white student from an economically disadvantaged high school:

I felt like at [my high school] it was essential to find a mentor.. to kind of move on and to kind of have guidance throughout [high school]... I found some of my English teachers were probably some of the greatest mentors I had in high school just because I'm an English major now. I've always loved to read and like it was something that we found in common and they were kind of able to foster.

Other close relationships with invested teachers were important to students when planning for college. Hugh, a Hispanic freshman from an economically disadvantaged high school explained his relationship with a math teacher this way:

[I was closer to] my math teacher whose son goes to the University of Kansas... It was awesome. She was like my second mother whenever my mom was away.

He goes on to describe her help when preparing for college:

In the end of it, it was really up to my decision, but my teacher really helped me out in choosing what I really wanted by asking me questions and kind of thinking through it myself... The application process was one of the most

grueling things because my mom didn't attend college so it was a struggle for me and I asked them [for help].

The mentor relationship described by several interviewees is summed up by Zach, a Hispanic junior from an economically advantaged high school as he describes his choir teacher:

So there's all these components, but you still have to balance that between also being a mentor, a friend, it's a really unique relationship, but that's what made it so great. You had that balance, but you could be more than just a teacher, because I think you see that in class. He was more than that and that was pretty influential.

The extra time spent outside of school makes a difference for many students. It provides an opportunity for teachers and students to form deeper connections and sets them up to help with college planning and preparation. Sharing a common interest in an extra-curricular activity creates an initial bond that opens up new lines of communication that can eventually lead to discussions about goals and college aspirations. In these relationships, teachers act as role models where they were one of few, if not the only, driving force behind students pursuing post-high school education.

Gabby, Ben and Max (all from economically disadvantaged high schools) all valued teachers who offered them advice and knowledge and fostered their talents while these were less critical for other participants in high schools of higher socioeconomic status. Alicia, Penny and Zach (all from economically advantaged high schools) all appreciated having a mentor but framed them as

playing a supportive and encouraging role in college planning while those from economically disadvantaged high schools were more likely to place a mentor as a driving and integral force behind their college planning process. The economically advantaged participants relied less upon teacher support when thinking about college as opposed to economically disadvantaged students who were in greater need of teacher support when applying for college and dealing with obstacles.

Clinton's story of his forensics teacher contains a critical element. Because the forensics teacher "grew up the same way [he] grew up" making them more connected, he could identify with his teacher. Seeing as his teacher would ultimately attend college after high school, it gave him someone with a similar background who pursued education post-high school. Having a person in authority take an interest in him and giving him the extra help to get to college motivated him. Identifying with someone like himself who attended college when he may not have had a significant number of people in his life who did so gave him encouragement to do the same.

The relationships that developed from the outside interaction between teachers and students led teachers to offer advice to students in the college planning process, write letters of recommendation, suggest programs of interest, and ensure they have everything in order for applications. Teachers could also fill roles that more privileged parents may be better able to play if they were familiar with the college planning process (as in the case of Hugh) or clearing up issues with admissions requirements (as in the case of Clinton).

This theme is significant in answering what factors make a difference across boundaries because it was mentioned by students regardless of race and class background. However, how these relationships were framed differed by class. Students of more privileged backgrounds were less likely to need a teacher to play an integral role in helping them get to college.

It's the Company You Keep

Across all participants, we see a common theme of the importance placed upon peer groups. This includes surrounding oneself with friends in college (whether at the University of Kansas or elsewhere) and disassociating oneself from peers who did not attend college. From there, the theme takes different shapes in regards to class differences that inform participants' actions.

For example, the expectations of friends' aspirations after high school are different among students of differing economic backgrounds. Take this example of two students who were asked about what their friends were doing now.

Tia, an African-American freshman from an economically advantaged high school describes her peer this way:

I'm actually kind of disappointed because, one of my friends, she dropped out of college after the first semester. I guess it was too hard for her.

While Suzie, an African-American senior from an economically disadvantaged high school has a different attitude about a friend in a similar situation:

My friend, she always talked about [going to college], but she never went... She hated school. So I never really expected her to keep going... Now I don't really

know why, I'm not really friends with [her] anymore.

There were a variety of responses when participants were asked about their friends in high school, their aspirations and their discussions about college. While many participants shared feelings of wanting to separate themselves from those who were unsure of what direction they wanted to take in life, Penny, a white freshman from an economically advantaged high school, was surrounded by peers who had a different way of dealing with the situation:

Out of my group of friends a good chunk of us, like, knew what we loved, what we wanted to do. And then, you know, the one's that didn't, they tried everything until they found it out.

When asked about her relationships with high school friends who made different choices, Claire, a white junior from an economically disadvantaged high school said:

Until last year, we had done really, really well about staying in contact, but it's kind of that thing where life goes in a completely different direction and the things that you have in common to talk about, you don't have any more and it's- it becomes a little more like your relationship is focused on the past than anything current in your lives.

Ben, a Hispanic junior from an economically disadvantaged high school expresses shares a similar loss of communication with friends who made different choices:

I do have like a group of friends that are kind of just like homebodies that are in [my hometown] and have either not gone to school or dropped out of

school since then. And then kind of.. I have lost touch with them.

Then the other ones, I can still keep in touch with that are at a university.

Ben's choice to only maintain relationships with friends who attended college is shared by other participants. Clinton notes that he purposefully surrounds himself with like-minded people:

So, I mean, most of the people, the friends that I kept close to me, like came here with me or went to a different school and still have very strong values and like I don't associate with people that's not really doing anything with their life.

Lance, an African-American student from an economically disadvantaged high school shared this attitude as well:

I've always set myself, like, taught myself that you're kind of looked upon with who you hang out and who you surround yourself with. So I've always thought of myself as being a driven person who wants to graduate from college and get a degree and get a nice job. I believe that's a lot of people's goal in college. So like you kind of are who you surround yourself with. I think I've surrounded myself with a lot of good individuals.

As they persist through college, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds look to advance themselves through education and no longer share this commonality with their former peers. The differences that emerge between students who choose to pursue college education and those who do not become dividing factors

in relationships, making them more difficult to maintain, as mentioned by Claire. Max also expresses that he lost touch with the people who chose not to pursue college after high school.

Separating oneself from high school peers was common among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, but not all of these separations were as amicable as “losing touch” in the cases of Claire and Max. Clinton and Lance were more purposeful in disassociating themselves with people who did not share what were considered “very strong values” or were “good individuals.” Their separation had a deeper meaning than casually losing touch over the loss of commonalities.

We learn a lot from Tia’s remark about being “disappointed” in a friend who dropped out of college after a semester, especially when comparing her to other participants. While we see differences between Claire and Max and Clinton and Lance, we see even greater differences between these four and Tia. No matter the reasons for which they separated from former peers, they all seemed to detach themselves in an unemotional way. Whether it slowly faded away or they believed friends no longer shared their values, they gave very little insight to how they felt about this. However, Tia, most of whose friends are still persisting in college, expresses feelings of disappointment over a friend no longer in college. This feeling implies she had initial expectations for that friend to obtain a college degree as she expects all of her other friends will. None of the economically disadvantaged students expressed a similar feeling of disappointment. Suzie shares that she never expected her friend to go to college and expresses a feeling of detachment from the situation. We often see lesser

expectations of post-high school education placed on friends from participants of economically disadvantaged high due to different college cultures in their schools.

Clinton and Lance’s reasoning of separating themselves due to a mismatch of values or not considering one a good individual because they chose not to attend college gives insight to the values systems both of these participants put in place upon attending college. They value their education and value peers who chose to further theirs as well. For peers who chose alternative lifestyles after college, they no longer consider these people to hold similar values or measure up to their standard of good.

Penny’s description of friends who “didn’t know what they wanted to do” also brings a perspective to the way class background influences what is considered uncertainty about the future. While she takes for granted that her friends would attend college even if they were unsure of what they wanted to do, participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds never made the assumption their friends would attend college to explore their options. Thus they adopted the strategy of surrounding themselves with people who knew what they wanted to do with their lives.

This transition of separating themselves from peers who chose alternative options after high school changed significantly with students in their sophomore, junior or senior years as opposed to those who were freshmen at the time of interviews. Freshmen were less likely to have severed contact with peers who were not attending college. Those who had lost contact with high school peers did not connect that with whether or not they were attending college. Freshmen have not been out of

high school long so they have had less time to diverge from these peers or have not fully developed an identity as a college student giving them less motivation to separate from non-college attending peers.

The distance that came between students and high school friends grew stronger as the years in college increased. While these students were in college and had moved away from their hometown and began living independently while attending school, they report that their high school classmates often remained in their hometowns. Because they had less in common, they related them more with being a part of the past than the future.

Appreciation for High School Experience

At the end of the interviews, I asked interviewees to reflect on their high school experience. At this time, only one of the students from a privileged background expressed gratitude about her high school experience. On the other hand, a majority of the students from disadvantaged backgrounds expressed gratitude. Instead, many of students from economically advantaged backgrounds referred to superficial factors including friends, easy classes, or extra-curricular memories.

For example, Zach, a Hispanic junior from an economically advantaged high school:

I wouldn't say it's a positive or negative experience. It was, I think, it's kind of contextual in terms of, there were parts of it I really enjoyed, there were social parts, there were also parts that I wasn't so keen on in terms of social aspects.

Tia, an African-American freshman from an economically advantaged high

school focuses on the "fun" aspect of her high school experience:

My high school experience I guess, it was fun. I had—I was with a lot of friends I was with since elementary school so I mean I kind of liked that, but some people didn't ...And it was a really good environment, my school was really judged against for being the rich kid schools which that kind of sucked when you met other people or whatever, but it was still fun.

However, several participants from economically disadvantaged high schools took the opportunity to share broader reflections on their high school and stressed a similar point- although they came from high schools that were not as privileged as the high schools of many of their college classmates, their high school experience shaped them into the students they are today.

Claire, a white junior from an economically disadvantaged high school, mentions her experience in this way:

I just really want to emphasize... how much I appreciated it. Like it was such an amazing time, because I had all of these people that I cared about and cared about me and everyone. The whole community was very supportive and I think the fact that everyone there had so many opportunities to try so many different things was a really, really great thing about growing up in such a small town that I really appreciated.

Lance, an African-American junior from an economically disadvantaged high school talks about the ways his high school experience prepared him for college in relation to his peers:

Just one thing is that I really did have a good high school career. I believe the high school that I went to definitely prepared me for college and I think that's a strong kind of emphasis that that high school that I went to... is that they placed is that we're kind of prepared for college not only just to get accepted to college, but also to prepare you for what college is gonna bring to your doorstep. Like just the work, I was kind of used to it more, because some of the other freshman entries in my class and I was able to adjust more to the workload and like how college was set up because that was kind of how high school was set up as well.

Max remembers high school as a positive experience while also acknowledging its shortcomings:

[My high school] is a special place. I think that it's interesting, because it really has this AP program that really caters to the highest achieving students and then it.. it's probably one of the best at special ed departments, in [the state] and in [the county]. Which isn't really saying much, but then what the problem is with [my high school] is that it doesn't cater to that middle like eighty percent and that's where I found the dropout factory to really happen. And like those were the kids that I expected I would never see again and that's where they're trying to come up with programming for that and like I kind of experienced that because a lot of my friends were in that kind of gap. And like I wasn't in the gifted program and

they got like priority advising and I was going in the counseling office.

We see this same attitude from Penny, a white freshman who graduated from an economically advantaged high school, only after transferring from an economically disadvantaged school:

Because I was new to that school and the education I had before I moved [there], I'm one of the few I think, after looking at what people say, that I really appreciate my education.

While most of the students from economically disadvantaged high schools noted their high schools did not provide the same things economically advantaged high schools could provide, they were quick to add that this did not detract from the influence their high school career had on them. This acknowledgement led to an appreciation of where they came from and the ways it equipped them with skills they may not have gained in a high school of higher socioeconomic status. A comparable appreciation of their high school experience was not mentioned by any of the participants from economically advantaged backgrounds suggesting the level of influence does not cross socioeconomic divides.

The responses given by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can also be attributed to the fact that students from underprivileged backgrounds are among the minority in college. Because they are frequently surrounded by those who came from dissimilar backgrounds, they are more aware of their experiences and the way these shaped them. Conversely, we do not see this from students of economically advantaged backgrounds as they are among the majority of college students which makes it more difficult to see this background as a point of reflection.

Privileged students were probably more likely to have had someone in their family attend college and knew how to do apply and enroll and were expecting them to follow the same path. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be encouraged to go to college, but their parents may not be able to give them much guidance as to how to get there. Their background contributed to the development of their identity as a college student and allowed them to better understand and appreciate the work it took them to get there and the influences that helped them achieve this status.

While high schools of lower socioeconomic status are often looked upon as not being able to prepare students as well for college, Lance feels his high school experience prepared him well. Using this information, we can also understand this theme as a set of responses to societal stereotypes of economically disadvantaged high schools. As more pressure is placed upon students to attend high schools that are often regarded as best preparing them for college, we see students who made it to college more greatly acknowledge adequate preparation after attending high schools that are often less regarded in society because of the resources they are able to offer students.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

From this research we find two critical factors and another important theme. Having a teacher in a mentoring role through extra-curricular advising can form a relationship that sets a student's aspirations for college in motion. College students coming from backgrounds that lack resources, both culturally and materially, found it important to separate themselves from friends who were not in college and surround themselves with other achieving students to help them

persist. As students persist through college, there is a growing recognition of the pride students from disadvantaged backgrounds have about where they came from. Each of these is important to better understanding how to narrow the gap between the amount of privileged and underprivileged students attending college.

One of the most critical themes found in this research is that race does not seem to make the difference that class does. While there are no significant differences among members of different racial categories, there are greater differences between participants of different socioeconomic status. Participants from advantaged backgrounds relied on mentors in determining majors and finding the top programs while those from disadvantaged backgrounds needed more help encouraging the idea of college and navigating the application process. Those from advantaged backgrounds were less likely to have peers who were not also in college and had expectations of their peers while participants from disadvantaged backgrounds separated themselves from a greater number of peers who were not in college. In their reflections on high school, privileged participants focused on more tangible factors unlike disadvantaged participants who reflected on how their high school experience shaped them. While a majority of the participants shared similar experiences in some respects, they were framed differently depending on the socioeconomic background of the participant and the value they placed on that. In addition to this finding, we see another issue presented when reading participant transcripts. While participants never acknowledge their race, they acknowledge their

socioeconomic status. This is often indirect, but still important to understanding the question because it is not only prevalent to the researcher but also a distinguishing mark for the participant.

My interviews showed how these factors to work together and complement each other, rather than a single factor influencing all participants over others. The combination of an encouraging mentor and surrounding oneself with like-minded peers led them to develop a skill set that helped them transition and persist through college. Having a mentor made the participants appreciate their high school experience because that person encouraged their development and helped them achieve their goals. We also see a trend of high school appreciation strengthening as participants began to surround themselves with like-minded peers who frequently have different backgrounds and thus gain a better awareness of what they overcame to get to college. The interweaving of these factors creates a structure in which each of these elements is critical in creating an environment for students to aspire to attend college and then thrive in the college environment.

The research also shows a pattern of themes being much more consistent among upperclassmen. They were more likely to elaborate on stories and include more insight in their answers which provided more room for analysis. I believe that this is due to the greater separation between their current status in college and their high school experience as opposed to freshmen who were interviewed and after only being in college for approximately a semester.

It also teaches how the college experience helps students develop an identity and that while in school their

student status often becomes their master status. College students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds form a distinct identity. They are disassociating themselves from those with shared backgrounds as those peers infrequently attend college. However, they are the minority among college students because of this same background. These divides result in this demographic of students forming an identity through the combination of these two components.

This exploratory research creates a better understanding of the experiences of college students from diverse backgrounds which leads to hypotheses about what could make significant impact in high schools and colleges.

This research lays a foundation for future studies that could further examine how to promote these environments. It reiterates the theories of past literature on the importance of peers in achieving aspirations and can inform future studies of the changing nature of these relationships. It may also lead to future studies on the way these students utilize their background in their personal identity development and as motivation to further themselves. While this research brings about new questions to be studied further, it helps answer some of the basic questions and provides a solid foundation and gives direction to future work.

In addition to further studies on the impact of social factors, it can be used to develop smart experiments within high schools and colleges. These include explorations into how to prepare teachers to best serve in a mentoring capacity and successfully encourage college among underrepresented populations. High schools can provide training for teachers on mentoring students and helping them

with college preparatory issues while also encouraging opportunities for both teachers and students to become involved with extra-curricular activities and form relationships. Because we find that students of underrepresented populations are going through larger transitions in terms of peer groups once in college, programs should also be developed to more deeply immerse these students into the college experience, helping them disassociate from high school peers and connect with colleagues who share similar future aspirations. Overall, we find that when implementing different practices to promote either of these factors, more attention needs to be focused on socioeconomic status rather than race.

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Table 1- Participant Data

Pseudonym	Race	High School SES Status	Year
Alicia	White	Economically Advantaged	Senior
Claire	White	Economically Disadvantaged	Junior
Max	White	Economically Disadvantaged	Sophomore
Penny	White	Economically Advantaged	Freshman
Zach	Hispanic	Economically Advantaged	Senior
Hugh	Hispanic	Economically Disadvantaged	Freshman
Gabby	Hispanic	Economically Disadvantaged	Junior
Ben	Hispanic	Economically Disadvantaged	Junior
Tia	African-American	Economically Advantaged	Freshman
Suzie	African-American	Economically Disadvantaged	Senior
Lance	African-American	Economically Disadvantaged	Junior
Clinton	African-American	Economically Disadvantaged	Senior

Appendix A- Interview Guide

Tell me about your high school experience

Classes

What classes did you enjoy most?[life skills, specific knowledge]

What extra-curricular activities were you involved in?[academically enriching, leadership, opportunity to excel]

Teachers

Were there particular teachers you were close to? [dedicated, invested in future, concerned with welfare]

Were there certain teachers who were more helpful? [assist in college applications, provide resources for college planning]

Peers

Tell me about the kind of people you hung out with in high school.[involvement, aspirations, attitudes about school]

What are they doing now? [separation due to different choices]

Is that what you expected when you were in high school?

Conclusion

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your high school experience?